

FRANK PARTRIDGE

A Fine Queen Anne Giltwood Pier Table with an early Egyptian Alabaster Top

English, Circa.1705

41 x 27 x 30.75 ins high (104 x 69 x 78 cm)

The giltwood side table having a rare early rectangular top of Egyptian alabaster, probably bought on the grand tour from a Roman classical sight, above a concave frieze decorated with stylised carved acanthus leaves alternating with framed harebells; the shaped apron centred with a shell adorned mask seemingly suspended by swags of leaves originating from scrolls of acanthus leaves attached on either side to two front solid legs formed as female caryatid supporting, seemingly on their heads, the entire moulded frieze and marble above. Each caryatid stands on a moulded block pedestal above acanthus decorated bun feet. The two sides of the table decorated with scrolling acanthus leaves and central plumes of acanthus; the back square decorated inverted baluster supports terminating in acanthus decorated bun feet all joined together by X-shaped scrolling stretchers, the centre supporting a reclining putto clasping a horn.

Egyptian Alabaster

It is known that there was an ancient town called Alabastron in the Nile valley of Egypt where a beautiful creamy-white banded calcite deposit was quarried as early as 4000 BC. This stone was named Alabaster. It was first worked for making small vases, bowls and handleless pots that were considered the best storage receptacles for perfumes and precious oils. It was also cut into slabs for construction and decoration, and by the time of the Pharaohs it was being carved to make figurines, sarcophagi, canopy and votive dishes. Some of the most notable examples to be seen today are the huge sarcophagus of Seti I in Sir John Soane's Museum in London, the alabaster sphinx at Memphis, and the statue of Amenhotep III and the crocodile god Sobek in Luxor. The ancient Romans enthusiastically adopted this stone when they subsumed Egypt into the Roman Empire, using it for columns, wine vessels and many other purposes.

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Report by Dr Adam Bowett:

This compact and remarkably original table embodies the French-inspired, high-baroque classicism which dominated English art and design at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. Tables of this form, with caryatid supports and crossed stretchers, emerged in Paris in the 1660s and are particularly associated with the designs of Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), whom Louis XIV appointed Director of the French Royal Workshops in 1663. The form was widely copied and occurs, for instance, in published engravings by Jean Le Pautre (1618-1682). One of Le Pautre's pupils, Daniel Marot, left France in 1686 to become designer and 'architect' to the Dutch Stadtholder, William of Orange, and together they inaugurated a new era of high-style French taste in Holland. When William succeeded to the English throne in 1689 he continued his promotion of French arts despite the fact that in commerce, in politics and on the battlefield he was the most implacable enemy of the French King.

Marot's work for William III in Holland is well documented, and includes a drawing of a table and stands with caryatid supports, dated 1701. The table was made for William's Dutch country house at Het Loo, and appears in Marot's engraving of William's apartments there, published in 1703. English craftsmen worked in the same vein, and the most remarkable surviving English caryatid table was made for the King in 1699 by the London goldsmith Andrew Moore. An example at Petworth is thought to combine a French metal marquetry top and English base, while at Hopetoun House, near Edinburgh, is a japanned and gilt suite with caryatid stands made for Charles Hope (later 1st Earl of Hopetoun) by an unknown English craftsmen about 1700.

Although derived from French prototypes, the present table has several typically English attributes, particularly the coved frieze with its punched ground and well-spaced shallow-relief decoration. Indeed, there are clear parallels with later work produced by London workshops in the 1720s. However, the deep apron and stylized pillar rear legs suggest an earlier date, the latter having close similarities with tables made about 1705 for Queen Anne by Jean Pelletier, while the scrolled and twisted stretcher echoes Andrew Moor's silver table of 1699. The ball foot with its leaf embellishment is also characteristic of English tables made in the 1690s and early 1700s.

Table's construction indicates that this is the product of a carver's workshop with no input from a joiner. It is entirely of lime wood, which was the preferred medium for high quality carved work, and has no frame. Instead, the four legs act as the principal structural elements to which the frieze rails are applied. The bottoms of the legs pass through the stretcher, locking it in place, and are dowelled into the feet. The water gilding is original. The top is a rare Egyptian alabaster, much prized by the Romans and probably re-used from a classical Roman site.

Dr. Adam Bowett, 7 January 2013

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Footnotes

1. Drawing from the workshop of Charles Le Brun of a caryatid candlestand for the King's audience chamber at Versailles, 1680s. *Nationalmuseum*, Stockholm (CC502)
2. Design for a table, glass and stands, engraving by Jean Berain, c.1680. *Metropolitan Museum*, New York, 33.84 (1-4).
3. Design for a table, mirror and stands, by Daniel Marot, 1701. *Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati*, Siena.
4. Plate 4 from *Nouveaux Livre de Partements*, by Daniel Marot, The Hague, 1703.
5. Table, made by Andrew Moore for the King's Apartments at Kensington, 1699. *The Royal Collection* RCIN 35301
6. Table and a pair of stands, made for the Duke of Somerset, c.1700. Petworth House, *The National Trust*.
7. Table, stands and looking glass, c.1700. *The Hopetoun House Trust*.
8. Table, c.1720, attributed to John Belchier. Erddig, *The National Trust*.